

Conflict, what conflict?: Evidence that playing down 'conflict' can be a weapon of choice for high-status groups

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## Abstract

Three studies using pre-existing (Studies 1 and 3) and minimal (Study 2) groups tested the hypothesis that ingroup status shapes whether ‘conflict’ with an outgroup is strategically acknowledged or downplayed. As predicted, high (vs. low) ingroup status led group members to downplay conflict, but only to an outgroup rather than ingroup audience (Studies 1 & 2;  $N$ s = 127 & 292), and only when the status difference was unstable (vs. stable) and the outgroup’s action was perceived as illegitimate (Study 2). High-status group members also collectively communicated with the outgroup in a manner designed to defuse conflict (Study 2). Survey data of industrial (manager-worker) relations further indicated that company managers (high-status) characterized manager–worker relations as less conflictual than did workers (low-status) in the same companies (Study 3;  $N$  = 24,661). Findings imply that high-status groups play down conflict as a ‘benevolent’ (but unacknowledged) means of maintaining intergroup status hierarchies.

Keywords: Status; intergroup relations; conflict; social identity



## Conflict, what conflict?: Evidence that playing down ‘conflict’ can be a weapon of choice for high-status groups

The 2012 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the European Union because, according to the awarding committee, “the EU has helped to transform most of Europe from a continent of war to a continent of peace” (The Nobel Peace Prize, 2012). This benign characterization of relations between member states was quickly challenged in many member states. This was particularly true in crisis-stricken Greece where a spokesman for the Syriza political party offered a very different characterization of the relations between member states and the EU: “In many parts of Europe, but especially in Greece, we are experiencing what really is a war situation on a daily basis... There is nothing peaceful about it” (Smith, 2012).

The contrast between these two characterizations of the relationship between EU member states – one as benign, one as conflictual – serves to highlight an important but neglected aspect of intergroup conflict: the very existence of ‘conflict’ is not self-evident and is often keenly contested by the groups involved. In this paper, we examine how group members’ characterizations of conflict with another group reflect strategic concerns linked to intergroup status, focusing in particular on whether playing down conflict with an outgroup can actually serve the interests of high-status groups who face a challenge from a lower-status outgroup.

### **From perceptions to strategic characterizations of conflict: The role of intergroup status.**

Status differences between groups are a crucial part of the dynamics of conflict, not least because intergroup status shapes group enhancement strategies (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Van Knippenberg, 1984; Walker & Smith, 2002). Specifically, ingroup status determines whether the aim of collective enhancement strategies is to overturn an outgroup’s superior status (i.e., changing the status quo by improving the ingroup’s status), or to protect the ingroup’s superior status (i.e., maintaining the status quo). Several influential theoretical perspectives – including system justification theory (see Jost et al., 2004, for a review) and social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) – suggest that high-status groups tend to act in more ingroup-serving ways than low-status groups. These perspectives echo influential meta-analyses which suggest that ingroup bias, although moderated by numerous other variables, tends to be stronger amongst members of relatively high-status groups (Bettencourt, Dorr, Charlton, & Hume, 2001; Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992).

Other research suggests that the strategic needs of high-status groups are often better served by other, less conflictual forms of behavior. For example, it has been found that under some circumstances, high-power groups display *less* ingroup favoritism (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985; Vanbeselaere, Boen, Van Avermaet, & Buelens, 2006) – a so-called *noblesse oblige* effect (see also Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). Similarly, research on intergroup helping suggests that rather than being altruistic and benign, ‘helping’ behavior from high-status groups towards low-status groups can reflect strategic motives on the part of the high-status group (Nadler, Harpaz-Gorodeisky, & Ben-David, 2009), and function as a device for maintaining their dominant position (Nadler & Halabi, 2006; see Jackman, 1994, and Glick & Fiske, 1996, for a similar point in relation to benevolent sexism). Other research on the effects of intergroup contact suggests that relative to low-status groups, high-status groups

prefer to focus on intergroup commonalities in ways that draw attention away from inequalities in status (Saguy, Dovidio, & Pratto, 2008; see also Dixon et al., 2012). However, the role of status differences in the characterization of conflict – and particularly the strategic nature of conflict acknowledgement or denial – has received little attention (Livingstone et al., 2015).

Our core argument is that characterizing an ingroup's relationship with an outgroup as being more or less conflictual may have strategic value when it comes to managing status relations between the groups, but this value will depend on ingroup status. When the ingroup has relatively low status, overtly acknowledging that conflict exists between the ingroup and outgroup is consistent with, and arguably a pre-requisite for, a strategy of direct social competition and conflict (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contrast, when the ingroup has high status, its interests may best be served by strategically avoiding any direct acknowledgement of conflict that could, in itself, give impetus to competitive action by the outgroup. In other words, it may be best for high-status groups not to 'rock the boat' unduly. This does not mean that high-status group members will not react at all to action by a low-status outgroup — rather, one largely unacknowledged strategy that is open to them is simply to avoid overt acknowledgment or retaliation, thereby reducing the potential for direct competition to develop. This may be contrasted with a situation in which the ingroup has low status and the transgressing outgroup has high status. Here, the ingroup has less to lose (in status terms at least) by adopting a strategy of direct social competition (Scheepers et al., 2006), and so should be more likely to acknowledge conflict than to downplay it.

In short, playing down conflict may under the right circumstances be a group-serving strategy for high-status groups. This hypothesis is tested in the studies reported below, focusing on two sets of factors that are expected to moderate the effect of status: the communicative context (i.e., the group that is being addressed), and perceptions of social structural conditions (i.e., the perceived stability of intergroup status differences, and the legitimacy of outgroup action).

### **Strategic aspects of intergroup behavior: Intergroup communication**

If the effect of status on the characterization of conflict varies as a function of strategic concerns, then it is likely to be sensitive to the intergroup communicative context, and, in particular, to the audience to which communications are addressed. We draw here on the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), which highlights strategic considerations in intergroup settings and the way in which communications are shaped by the

audience that participants feel they are addressing (Klein, Spears, & Reicher, 2007; Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995). One may express intergroup concerns differently to an outgroup audience than to an ingroup audience, particularly when intergroup relations are characterized by status and/or power differences (Barreto et al., 2003; Reicher & Levine, 1994). On this basis, we predicted that the effect of status on characterizations of conflict would be greater when addressing an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience. For low-status group members, playing up conflict to an outgroup helps to communicate dissatisfaction about the situation, while for high-status group members, downplaying conflict to the outgroup represents an attempt to defuse the situation in a manner that helps maintain the status quo (cf. Singh, Choo, & Poh, 1998). Neither of these strategic motives can be realized to the same extent when addressing an ingroup audience, and so here the effect of status should be less evident. Indeed, addressing an ingroup audience may provide a safe space in which high-status group members can actually acknowledge the potential conflict. Finally, if the characterization of conflict does have strategic value, then it should be evident in intergroup communication. That is, high-status group members will collectively attempt to defuse conflict in their communication with the outgroup.

#### **Social structural constraints on the effect of status: (In)stability and (il)legitimacy**

If playing up or playing down conflict reflects the strategic interests of groups that have different status, then characterizations of their ingroup's relationship with an outgroup should be influenced by different appraisals of the status relationship, such as whether status differences are perceived to be stable or unstable (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002; Ellemers, Van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; see Ellemers, 1993, for a review). Unstable status implies that change to the status quo is possible or likely, and provides a context within which low-status groups can achieve such a change. In contrast, stable status implies that change to the status quo is unlikely or impossible, regardless of the efforts of low-status groups. From the perspective of high-status groups, unstable (changeable) status requires a strategic response to outgroup action in a way that is not the case when status is stable. If the effect of status on conflict characterization reflects strategic concerns associated with status, then it should be greater when status is unstable rather than stable.

Another appraisal that should moderate the effect of status on strategic responses to potentially conflictual outgroup action is the perceived *legitimacy* of this action (Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008; Wright, 1997). Illegitimate outgroup action implies that the ingroup has been wronged by the outgroup's action, whereas legitimate outgroup action

implies that the ingroup has not been wronged. From the perspective of a high-status group, an outgroup's action demands a more marked strategic response when the action is perceived to be illegitimate than when it is perceived as legitimate. In the present context – and particularly in relation to Study 2 – it is important to note that we are referring here to the perceived illegitimacy of an outgroup's *specific action*, rather than the perceived legitimacy of their status, which has typically been the focus of previous research. In other words, our reasoning relates to the perceived legitimacy of *incidental* rather than *structural* disadvantage (see Van Zomeren et al., 2008, for a discussion of this difference in relation to collective action).

### **Overview of the present research**

Study 1 replicates and extends the only prior research on these hypotheses (Livingstone et al., 2015) by testing the strategic aspects of the relationship between ingroup status and characterizations of conflict, focusing (a) on whether (and how) the nature of an audience (ingroup vs. outgroup) moderates the effect of manipulated ingroup status on conflict characterizations, and (b) whether a status management motive might mediate this link. Study 2 then tests our hypotheses in an interactive paradigm that involves two groups on either side of a status divide, and examines the moderating effects of audience and the stability of status differences (directly manipulated) and of the perceived illegitimacy of the outgroup's action (measured). Study 2 also tests whether group status affects the extent to which, following intra-group discussion, group members collectively *communicate* with the outgroup in a manner designed to escalate or de-escalate conflict. Finally, Study 3 tests the effect of status in a real-world context (workplace relations in UK companies), focusing on how status (worker vs. manager) predicts how positively or negatively those relations are characterized. These studies provide tests of our hypotheses in a combination of pre-existing and minimal groups, using different methods for manipulating intergroup status. In reporting these studies we include all measures, manipulations, and exclusions.

To summarize, we hypothesize that high (vs. low) ingroup status will lead group members to strategically play down the existence of conflict (H1a) when addressing an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience (H1b), and when status differences are unstable and the outgroup's action is perceived as illegitimate (H2; Study 2). We also hypothesize that high ingroup status will lead group members to collectively communicate with the outgroup in a manner designed to defuse intergroup tension (H3; Study 2).

## Study 1

The primary aim of Study 1 was to test H1a and H1b by manipulating the audience (ingroup vs. outgroup) to which participants believed their responses would be presented, in addition to manipulating ingroup status (high vs. low) relative to an outgroup. This builds upon the only prior test of this effect (Livingstone et al., 2015) in several ways. In addition to replicating the effect *per se* using a larger sample and a different context, we employed a more controlled manipulation of ingroup status in this study by varying the status relationship between the ingroup and a given outgroup, rather than by varying the comparison outgroup – a method that is effective, but more vulnerable to confounds.

We also included a more direct test of the assumed motive underlying a strategic effect of ingroup status. Specifically, we predicted that the extent to which participants are satisfied with their ingroup's status – indicating status management motives – would at least partially mediate the effect of status on characterizations of conflict. Seeing an ingroup's status as satisfactory or not is the critical appraisal in the experience of having a negative (unsatisfactory) or positive (satisfactory) social identity following social comparison, providing the motivational drive towards maintaining or changing the status quo (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). If the effect of status on conflict characterizations is strategic, then there is reason to expect an indirect, negative effect of status on conflict characterization through satisfaction with ingroup status. High ingroup status should predict greater satisfaction with ingroup status (indicating a desire to maintain the status quo), which should in turn predict a characterization of the relationship as less conflictual. Finally, in line with H1a and b, we also expected that the indirect effect of status would be moderated by audience. These predictions are represented in Figure 2.

## Method

Data and materials are available from the project OSF page:  
[https://osf.io/sbdp4/?view\\_only=57ed6d9e078e439bb44d5fa245c860cf](https://osf.io/sbdp4/?view_only=57ed6d9e078e439bb44d5fa245c860cf).

### Participants

One hundred and thirty-eight undergraduate students (110 females and 17 males) with a mean age of 20.06 years ( $SD = 3.41$ ) took part in the in-class study as part of a course requirement. Eleven participants were subsequently excluded prior to the main analyses. Six of these expressed suspicion about the purpose of the study, while a group of five were excluded because one of them closely identified with the location of the outgroup university, and brought this into the group discussion that followed.

The size of the sample was determined by the number of people taking the class, and all data were collected before analyses were conducted. A sensitivity analysis in G\*power 3.1 indicated that the final sample of 127 provides 80% power to detect an effect as small as  $\eta_p^2 = .059$  in the present design ( $df_{num} = 1$ ; groups = 4).

## Design

The study had a 2 (ingroup status: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (audience: ingroup vs. outgroup) between-participants design. Participants were randomly allocated to one of the four conditions. The main dependent variables were characterizations of conflict with the outgroup, and satisfaction with the ingroup's status.

## Materials

**Audience manipulation.** Audience was manipulated by varying the introductory text that prefaced the main stimulus article. This text stated that the aim of the questionnaire was to gather opinions within the ingroup with a view to presenting them to senior figures in the ingroup University (ingroup audience condition), or to senior figures at the outgroup University (outgroup audience condition).

**Stimulus article.** The stimulus article was designed to appear as if it had come from the website of the main student newspaper at the ingroup university. The article reported that the ingroup University had been rejected from an inter-disciplinary conference organized by an outgroup university (Essex University, located in the South-East of England). A spokesperson for the outgroup University emphasized that the ingroup University had been rejected because they were not felt to be of a sufficiently high academic standard.

To manipulate relative intergroup status, the article also reported the ingroup's and outgroup's actual rankings in league tables of research excellence, based on results from what at the time was the latest Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the UK. In the low ingroup status condition, the measure used to rank the universities was the proportion of research deemed to be world leading by the RAE. According to this measure, the outgroup university was ranked 11<sup>th</sup> in the UK, while the ingroup university was ranked 28<sup>th</sup>. In the high ingroup status condition, the measure used to rank the universities was research power (calculated as the GPA of the assessed research multiplied by the number of research-active staff). According to this measure, the outgroup university was ranked 44<sup>th</sup> in the UK, while the ingroup university was ranked 25<sup>th</sup>. In this way, ingroup status relative to the same outgroup was manipulated (as it often is by organizational leaders; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996) while all the time referring to real, objectively verifiable data. This meant that the manipulation of

status was not only clear, but also had high levels of mundane realism (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1968). Only the rankings of the ingroup and the outgroup were included in any given article.

**Questionnaire measures.** The article was followed by a questionnaire containing all relevant measures. It began with an audience manipulation check, on which participants had to indicate by checking a box whether the questionnaire findings would be reported to senior ingroup members or senior outgroup members. There followed a manipulation check of relative intergroup status. This asked whether, according to the article, the ingroup had higher, lower, or equal status compared to the outgroup, and was scored from -4 (*lower status than the outgroup*) through 0 (*equal*) to 4 (*higher status than the outgroup*).

Conflict characterization was measured on a six-item scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ): ‘There is a lot of tension/ conflict/ no problem at all/hostility between [ingroup] and [outgroup]’; ‘[ingroup] gets along with [outgroup]’; and ‘There are good relations between [ingroup] and [outgroup]’. Scores on the ‘no problem at all’, ‘gets along with’ and ‘good relations’ items were reversed. Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from -3 (*completely disagree*) to 3 (*completely agree*)<sup>1</sup>.

Dissatisfaction with ingroup status was measured on a three-item scale ( $\alpha = .99$ ): ‘[Ingroup]’s academic status compared to [outgroup] makes me feel *disappointed/ displeased/ unsatisfied*’. Responses were made on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*)<sup>2</sup>.

### **Procedure**

All participants took part in the study at the same time in a large lecture hall containing tables that accommodated five to seven individuals. The study was briefly introduced as being about the psychology of social perception. Participants were then divided in to groups of five to seven (26 groups in total, 25 of which were retained for analysis) based on their initial seating arrangement and were each individually presented with one version of the stimulus article and the questionnaire. All members of a given group were allocated to the same condition, and all participants were led to believe that they were responding to the same article. Participants were then instructed to read the stimulus article, to discuss it if they wished within their group, and then to complete the questionnaire individually. They were also explicitly instructed not to communicate with any of the other groups. All participants had completed the questionnaire within 10-15 minutes of the distribution of the materials. At that point, all materials were collected by the experimenter and participants were fully debriefed as to the purpose and design of the study.



## Results

Unless otherwise stated, analyses took the form of 2 (ingroup status: high vs. low)  $\times$  2 (audience: ingroup vs. outgroup) ANOVAs<sup>3</sup>.

### Manipulation checks

A significant main effect of status on the status manipulation check confirmed its effectiveness,  $F(1, 122) = 1276.89, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .91, 90\% CI [.890, .927]$ . Participants in the high ingroup status condition ( $M = 3.41, SD = 1.28$ ) perceived their ingroup to have higher status than did participants in the low ingroup status condition ( $M = -3.19, SD = 0.74$ ). No other effects were significant,  $F_s \leq 1.53, p_s \geq .219, \eta^2_p s \leq .012$ .

Responses on the audience manipulation check indicated that all but five participants correctly identified the supposed intended audience of their responses. Four participants answered incorrectly, while another did not answer the question. Excluding these participants did not affect the overall pattern of findings, so they were retained in the data set in order to ensure random allocation to condition.

### Dissatisfaction with ingroup status

The only significant effect on the dissatisfaction with ingroup status scale was the main effect of status,  $F(1, 123) = 583.28, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .83, 90\% CI [.781, .855]$  (other  $F_s < 1$ ). Participants in the low ingroup status condition ( $M = 5.60, SD = 1.20$ ) were more dissatisfied with the ingroup's status than those in the high ingroup status condition ( $M = 1.44, SD = 0.57$ ).

### Conflict characterization

The only significant effect on the conflict characterization scale was the predicted two-way interaction between status and audience,  $F(1, 123) = 9.80, p = .002, \eta^2_p = .07, 90\% CI [.017, .156]$  (other  $F_s < 1$ ). This interaction is shown in Figure 1. Simple main effects analyses revealed that the effect of status was significant in the outgroup audience condition,  $F(1, 123) = 7.59, p = .007, \eta^2_p = .06, 90\% CI [.009, .135]$ , but not in the ingroup audience condition,  $F(1, 123) = 3.01, p = .085, \eta^2_p = .02, 90\% CI [.000, .084]$ . In the outgroup audience condition, participants in the high ingroup status condition characterized the relationship with the outgroup as less conflictual ( $M = 0.24, SD = 1.08$ ) than those in the low ingroup status condition ( $M = 0.88, SD = 0.88$ ).

### Moderated mediation analyses

We then performed a moderated mediation analysis to examine the indirect effect of ingroup status on conflict characterization through dissatisfaction with ingroup status. In this

model, we specified ingroup status as the predictor, audience as the moderator, dissatisfaction with ingroup status as the mediator, and conflict characterization as the outcome. In this case, the moderated path is between the mediator and the outcome, as indicated in Figure 2 (Model 14 in Hayes', 2013, guidelines). Using 5000 bootstrap samples with replacement, the analysis confirmed that the indirect effect of ingroup status on conflict characterization through dissatisfaction with ingroup status was negative (bootstrapped indirect effect = -0.71;  $SE$  = 0.42) and significant (95% bias corrected  $CI$ s = -1.66; -0.01) in the outgroup audience condition, but not in the ingroup audience condition (bootstrapped indirect effect = 0.02;  $SE$  = 0.43; 95% bias corrected  $CI$ s = -0.80; 0.87). The index of moderated mediation also indicated that the mediated effect via status dissatisfaction was significantly different between the two audience conditions, 95% bias corrected  $CI$ s = -1.34; -0.15.

### Discussion

The results support H1a and b by showing that when faced with an outgroup challenge, high (vs. low) ingroup status led group members to downplay the extent to which there was conflict with the outgroup, but only when addressing an outgroup audience. Moreover, there was evidence that in the outgroup audience condition, ingroup status indirectly affected conflict characterizations through a status management motive, indicated by dissatisfaction with ingroup status. Specifically, higher ingroup status predicted less dissatisfaction with ingroup status. Lower levels of dissatisfaction in turn predicted a characterization of the ingroup-outgroup relationship as being less conflictual; but again, only in the outgroup audience condition. When addressing an ingroup audience, neither the direct nor indirect effect of status was significant. Indeed, if anything the effect of status began to reverse in the ingroup audience condition, with the relationship being characterized as *more* conflictual by those in the high ingroup status condition (a difference that was not, however, significant at the .05 level).

These results are consistent with other research that has highlighted the way in which the strategic expression of group-based concerns varies as a function of communicative context (Barreto et al., 2003; Klein et al., 2007; Reicher et al., 1995). However, while previous research has demonstrated that outcomes such as identity expression (Barreto et al., 2003; Reicher & Levine, 1994; Reicher et al., 1998), intergroup differentiation (Ellemers, Van Dyck, Hinkle, & Jacobs, 2000) and ingroup bias (Scheepers et al., 2006) are shaped by audience, the present research demonstrates that characterization of the intergroup relationship itself (as conflictual or not) varies strategically as a function of the communicative context.

## Limitations and caveats

Although the method of manipulating ingroup status relative to the same outgroup in this study was effective and avoided potential confounds arising from varying the comparison outgroup, there is clearly value in directly testing our hypotheses regarding the strategic dimension of the effect of status by sampling from *both* sides of the same intergroup status relationship. Relatedly, while the use of pre-existing groups has strengths in terms of validity and the subjective meaningfulness of these processes for participants, it also carries a risk that the observed effects are influenced by some extraneous factor specific to the group or groups in question. In our view this is unlikely in the present case because we took care to select groups that had no previous history of antagonistic or friendly relations that would have been known to participants; nevertheless, the influence of prior expectations cannot be ruled out conclusively. For these reasons, in Study 2 we tested our hypotheses using ad-hoc ‘minimal’ groups.

As argued earlier, the interplay between status and audience effects on characterizations of conflict is also likely in turn to depend on other features of the context. Specifically, if characterizations of conflict are strategic, then it is likely that the interaction between status and audience is itself contingent on other factors that shape group members’ concerns. There is therefore scope to extend the study’s design to examine how other structural concerns – such as the stability of the intergroup status difference, and the perceived legitimacy of the outgroup’s action – shape the effect of status on characterizations of conflict (H2 & H3).

## Study 2

The aim of Study 2 was to test our hypotheses in an interactive paradigm that involved two groups on either side of a status divide. In order to rule out the effect of pre-existing norms, conflicts, group history and other factors, we used ad-hoc (minimal) groups to which participants were assigned at random. Defining one of these groups as superior to the other served to manipulate status, while stability was varied by emphasizing that this superiority was either relatively fixed or relatively easy to nullify. Along with measured perceptions of illegitimacy, these manipulations allowed us to test the interactive effect of status on participants’ characterization of the relationship between the ingroup and outgroup.

In addition to participants’ individual characterizations of this relationship, we also examined whether group status affected the extent to which, following intra-group discussion, group members collectively *communicate* with the outgroup in a manner designed to escalate or de-escalate conflict (H3). In order to replicate and extend the findings of Study

1, we also manipulated the *audience* to which this communication was directed (ingroup audience vs. outgroup audience).

We predicted that when status differences were unstable and the outgroup's action was perceived as illegitimate, high ingroup status would not only lead group members to individually play down conflict (H1), but also to collectively communicate with the outgroup in a manner designed to defuse intergroup tension (H3) – especially when addressing an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience.

### Method

Materials and data are available from the project OSF page:

[https://osf.io/sbdp4/?view\\_only=57ed6d9e078e439bb44d5fa245c860cf](https://osf.io/sbdp4/?view_only=57ed6d9e078e439bb44d5fa245c860cf).

### Participants

Two hundred and ninety-two psychology undergraduates (223 females, 68 males and one not recorded;  $M_{\text{age}} = 20.21$ ;  $SD = 5.31$ ) participated in the in-class study as a course requirement<sup>4</sup>. The size of the sample was determined by the number of people taking the class, and all data were collected before analyses were conducted. A sensitivity analysis using G\*power 3.1 indicated that the final sample of 292 provides 80% power to detect an effect as small as  $\eta_p^2 = .026$  in the present design ( $df_{\text{num}} = 1$ ; groups = 16). It had 99.8% power to detect an effect of equivalent magnitude ( $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ) to that found for the status X audience interaction in Study 1.

### Design

The study had a 2 (ingroup status: high vs. low) X 2 (stability of status: stable vs. unstable) X 2 (audience: ingroup vs. outgroup) between-participants design. The perceived illegitimacy of the outgroup's message was included as a measured moderator.

### Materials and procedure

Data collection took place in lab classes containing between 20 and 30 psychology undergraduate students. The classes were introduced as being about individual differences in abstract problem solving.

**Minimal group assignment.** Participants were assigned to the (minimal) category of inductive thinkers or the category of deductive thinkers (Doosje et al., 1995) ostensibly on the basis of their performance on word and number association tasks, which were described as revealing participants' thinking style (after Tajfel, Flament, Billig & Bundy, 1971). In reality, assignment was random.

**Status and stability manipulations.** The status difference between the groups was operationalized by informing participants that inductive thinkers (the high-status group) consistently perform better than deductive thinkers (the low-status group) on the abstract problem solving tasks that would form the remainder of the lab class. The stability of this status difference was manipulated by informing participants that past research indicated that the difference was relatively easy to rectify with “training collaboration” (unstable status condition), or that it was extremely difficult to reduce the difference between the groups (stable status condition).

**Separation of groups.** Participants were told that the remainder of the class would involve working on abstract problem solving tasks in their respective groups. The two groups were separated by asking members of the low-status group (deductive thinkers) to go with the second experimenter to a different room, while the inductive thinkers – as the ostensibly more able group – were to remain with the lead experimenter. Following their separation, the groups underwent exactly the same procedure.

**Outgroup ‘message’.** On the pretense that the purpose of the lab was to examine the effect of collaboration on performance on abstract problem-solving tasks, participants were assigned to pairs (or pairs and one group of three if there were an odd number of participants). They were also told that there would be an opportunity later in the class to work with the outgroup, but only if both groups agreed to do so. Ostensibly in order to check whether the outgroup had reached a decision on whether they wanted to work together subsequently, the experimenter left the room and returned after a short while with a hand-written message purportedly from the other group. In reality, the message was one of two identical messages (one per group) that were pre-prepared and hidden near the classrooms. The experimenter explained that the outgroup was strongly of the opinion that its members did not want to collaborate with the ingroup, reflected in the message, which read ‘We do not want to work with you!!!’ accompanied by an angry ‘smiley’ face.

**Audience manipulation and group-level written response.** In their pairs, participants were asked to discuss and write a response. In the outgroup audience condition, it was emphasized that these responses would be collated and anonymously presented to the outgroup. In the ingroup audience condition, it was emphasized that these responses would be collated and discussed only within the ingroup, and not communicated to the outgroup. These messages were subsequently coded by two condition-blind coders. The coders scored each message on a three-item semantic differential scale (*friendly – hostile*; *intended to decrease conflict – intended to increase conflict*; and *intended to improve relations with the outgroup –*

*intended to worsen relations with outgroup*) assessing the extent to which the message was designed to escalate or defuse conflict between the groups. Responses were made on 7-point scales scored from -3 (*indicating an attempt to defuse conflict*) to 3 (*indicating an attempt to escalate conflict*). Scores were first averaged across the three measures to form a single score for each message for each coder ( $\alpha$ s = .99 & .98), and then across the two coders (intraclass  $r$  = .85) to form a single score for each message.

**Individual-level questionnaire measures<sup>5</sup>.** After finishing their written response, each participant completed a questionnaire containing the following measures. Unless otherwise stated, responses were made on 7-point scales ranging from -3 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*).

**Manipulation checks.** The manipulation of status was checked with one item. Participants were asked to indicate the status of their group relative to the outgroup on a 9-point scale ranging from -4 (*worse than Inductive/Deductive thinkers*) through 0 (equal) to 4 (*better than Inductive/Deductive thinkers*). The status stability manipulation was checked using a 4-item scale ( $\alpha$  = .82). Example items include *Deductive thinkers can easily catch up to Inductive thinkers in terms of problem-solving performance* (reverse-scored) and *There is little chance that Deductive thinkers could catch up to Inductive thinkers in terms of problem-solving performance*.

**Conflict characterization.** Characterization of conflict was measured on a five-item scale ( $\alpha$  = .88). Participants were asked about the extent to which there was *a lot of tension / conflict / hostility / good relations* between the groups; and the extent to which the groups *get along*. The *good relations* and *get along* items were reverse-scored<sup>6</sup>.

**Illegitimacy.** The perceived illegitimacy of the outgroup's message was measured on a two-item scale ( $r$  = .66,  $p$  < .001). Participants were asked about the extent to which the message was *out of order* and *unfair*.

## Results

Unless otherwise stated, analyses involved 2 (ingroup status: high vs. low) X 2 (stability of status: stable vs. unstable) X 2 (audience: ingroup vs. outgroup) X illegitimacy (continuous; mean-centered) between-participants ANOVAs<sup>7</sup>.

### Manipulation checks

A significant main effect of status on the status manipulation check confirmed its effectiveness,  $F(1, 275) = 264.87$ ,  $p$  < .001,  $\eta^2_p = .49$ , 90% *CI* [.424, .547]. Participants in the high-status group ( $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) perceived their ingroup to have higher status than

participants in the low-status group ( $M = -1.41$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). No other effects were significant apart from a small main effect of the audience manipulation,  $F(1, 275) = 4.94$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .018$ , 90%  $CI$  [.001, .051]. Participants in the outgroup audience condition ( $M = 0.53$ ,  $SD = 2.32$ ) reported higher ingroup status than did participants in the ingroup audience condition ( $M = 0.04$ ,  $SD = 2.19$ ).

The effectiveness of the stability manipulation was also confirmed by a significant main effect of stability,  $F(1, 276) = 169.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .38$ , 90%  $CI$  [.308, .443]. Participants in the stable status condition ( $M = 0.49$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) perceived the status difference to be more stable than participants in the unstable status condition ( $M = -1.23$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). Aside from a main effect of the illegitimacy scale,  $F(1, 276) = 8.50$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , 90%  $CI$  [.006, .070], no other effects were significant.

Analysis of scores on the illegitimacy scale indicated that there were no main or interactive effects of the manipulated variables ( $F_s \leq 2.62$ ,  $p_s \geq .107$ ), confirming its appropriateness as a measured moderator in subsequent analyses.

### **Conflict characterization**

Analyses of the conflict characterization scale (see Figure 3) revealed that, as in Study 1, the status  $\times$  audience interaction was significant,  $F(1, 276) = 13.28$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .05$ , 90%  $CI$  [.014, .092], but qualified by a four-way interaction between all of the factors,  $F(1, 276) = 4.22$ ,  $p = .041$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ , 90%  $CI$  [.0003, .047]. To decompose this four-way interaction, we focused first on the conditions under which the status  $\times$  audience interaction identified in Study 1 was significant, before examining the simple main effects of status within audience conditions.

The first step in these analyses revealed that the status  $\times$  stability  $\times$  audience interaction was only significant when illegitimacy was high ( $M + 1SD$ ; see panels B and D of Figure 3),  $F(1, 276) = 6.50$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .02$ , 90%  $CI$  [.003, .060];  $F < 1$  when illegitimacy was low ( $M - 1SD$ ). Splitting the data file by stability further revealed that when illegitimacy was high ( $M + 1SD$ ), the interaction between status and audience was only significant when status was unstable,  $F(1, 125) = 18.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .13$ , 90%  $CI$  [.050, .220] ( $F < 1$  when status was stable), and followed a pattern consistent with that found in Study 1.

Recombining the data file, simple main effects analyses in the unstable status conditions revealed that when illegitimacy was high, the simple effect of status was highly significant in the outgroup audience condition,  $F(1, 276) = 10.19$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .04$ , 90%  $CI$  [.009, .079]. Here the high-status group played down conflict (panel D of Figure 3) more than

the low-status group. The simple effect of status was also significant in the ingroup audience condition, but in the opposite direction: conflict was played *up* to a greater extent by the high-status group,  $F(1, 276) = 6.81, p = .010, \eta_p^2 = .02, 90\% CI [.001, .049]$ .

### Written response

The written response scores were analyzed in a 4-way ANOVA with status, stability, audience and illegitimacy as fixed factors. A main effect of status,  $F(1, 128) = 14.96, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .105, 90\% CI [.035, .192]$ , was qualified by an interaction between status and stability,  $F(1, 128) = 6.96, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .052, 90\% CI [.007, .125]$ , illustrated in Figure 4. The simple main effect of status was only significant in the unstable status condition,  $F(1, 128) = 18.17, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .124, 90\% CI [.048, .214]$  ( $F < 1$  in the stable status condition). In the unstable status condition, the communications from the high-status group attempted to defuse conflict to a greater degree than those of the low-status group. The simple effect of stability was only significant for the high-status group,  $F(1, 128) = 5.89, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .044, 90\% CI [.004, .114]$  ( $F = 1.85$  for the low-status group), suggesting that the effect of status reflects a strategic response from the high-status group. However, while the interaction between status and stability was only significant in the outgroup audience condition,  $F(1, 65) = 7.24, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = .100, 90\% CI [.014, .222]$  ( $F = 1.06$  in the ingroup audience condition), the moderating effect of audience was not significant,  $F(1, 128) = 1.44, p = .232, \eta_p^2 = .011, 90\% CI [.000, .059]$ . Likewise, the status X stability interaction was not moderated by illegitimacy ( $F < 1$ ), or qualified by the four-way interaction  $F(1, 128) = 1.08, p = .302, \eta_p^2 = .008, 90\% CI [.000, .053]$ .

### Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses, high ingroup status (vs. low ingroup status) led group members to play down conflict following provocative action from an outgroup. However, this pattern was obtained only (1) when the status difference was unstable and the outgroup's action was perceived as illegitimate (H2), and (2) when addressing the outgroup rather than the ingroup (H1b). Moreover, when the status difference was unstable, high ingroup status led group members to collectively communicate with the outgroup in a manner designed to defuse conflict (H3).

These findings replicate and extend the effect of status on characterizations of conflict, and the moderating role of audience found in Study 1. The moderating roles of stability, illegitimacy, and audience further support the idea that the effects of status are strategic in nature, rather than a generic or fixed perceptual effect (e.g., that high-status group



members play down conflict because they do not see a low-status outgroup as a relevant comparison group). Specifically, the effect of status emerged only when social structural conditions required a strategic response to the outgroup's action. When the outgroup's action was unlikely to affect the ingroup's high status (stable conditions) and/or was not perceived as illegitimate, then the strategic impetus to respond in a manner that reduced the potential for competition was less pronounced. In these combinations, there was no effect of status on characterizations of conflict.

In turn, the same social-structural conditions (unstable status and illegitimate outgroup action) led high-status group members to play down conflict only when they were addressing an outgroup rather than an ingroup audience — a pattern that was also found in Study 1, and which further underlines the strategic, communicative dimension of characterizations of conflict. Although audience and illegitimacy did not moderate the interaction between status and stability when it came to actual collective communication, this is likely to reflect, at least in part, the lower power of the group-level analysis of the written responses. Descriptively, the pattern was of the predicted form, in that the interaction was only significant in the outgroup audience condition, and the pattern of the interaction closely followed that observed on the individual questionnaire responses in the outgroup audience condition. Nevertheless, the absence of clear moderating effects of audience and illegitimacy leaves it unclear as to whether the predicted effect of ingroup status on actual intergroup communication (H3) is moderated by these social structural variables. Along with replication of the more clearly supportive findings, future research is needed to further test this possibility.

One unexpected aspect of the findings was that when the status difference was unstable and the outgroup's action was perceived as illegitimate, the effect of ingroup status actually reversed in the ingroup audience condition. That is, conflict was played *up* to a greater extent by the high-status group – an effect that was also apparent descriptively in Study 1, but not significant. This likely indicates an additional facet to the strategic nature of conflict characterization: while high-status groups may outwardly downplay conflict in response to a challenge, they inwardly characterize the relationship as antagonistic. This potentially functions as a mobilization tool for fellow ingroup members, signaling the need for watchfulness and readiness for a response should the challenge escalate. In this way, the de-escalation implied by downplaying conflict to an outgroup audience goes hand-in-hand with a readiness to escalate communicated to ingroup members.

As well as replicating and extending the findings of Study 1, the findings of this study are also consistent with previous research which has explored the way in which appraisals of social-structural conditions such as the stability of intergroup status differences moderate intergroup orientations (Bettencourt et al., 2001; Doosje et al., 2002; Ellemers et al., 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, very little of this previous work has examined how such conditions interact with the communicative context to shape the strategic expression of ingroup concerns (for an exception, see Scheepers et al., 2006). The present findings thus speak to the value of integrating perspectives on how aspects of the social context relating to communicative opportunities (e.g., salient audience; public vs. private self-awareness; anonymity) shape the expression of group-based concerns with perspectives on how other relational aspects of the social context (e.g., status differences; legitimacy perceptions; perceptions of status stability) shape what those concerns might be (see Klein et al., 2007).

The use of ‘minimal’ groups in Study 2 also complements the use of pre-existing groups in Study 1, as does the use of a paradigm that sampled both sides of the same intergroup divide, and which involved analysis of both individual-level responses and collective communication with an outgroup. The potential limitations and constraints of using minimal groups to examine ‘hot’ intergroup phenomena are highlighted elsewhere (e.g., Jetten, Spears, & Manstead, 1996), and include the fact that, relative to pre-existing groups, minimal groups are both less psychologically meaningful *per se*, and can also make different concerns and motives salient (e.g., the motive to establish group distinctiveness; Spears et al., 2002). In the present case, these concerns about external validity are somewhat reduced by the fact that our findings align with those of Study 1 (in which groups were non-minimal) while also ruling out the impact of potential confounds and extraneous variables. To further test the real-world relevance of these findings, Study 3 involved a test of our main hypothesis regarding the effect of intergroup status on the characterization of conflict in the context of industrial (manager-employee) relations.

### Study 3

Study 3 involved secondary analysis of data from the most recent (2011) Workplace and Employment Relations Study (WERS) in the UK. The WERS “aims to provide a nationally representative account of the state of employment relations and working life inside British workplaces” (The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study, 2015), and the 2011 survey included data gathered from managers and employees in a representative sample of 2,680 workplaces in the UK.

The WERS addresses numerous aspects of workplace relations, but of particular relevance to the present research is that it asks both employees and managers to characterize relations between employees and managers in the workplace. This enabled us to test the prediction, based on H1a, that those in a relatively high-status group (management) would characterize relations more positively than those in a relatively low-status group (employees). The survey also recorded data on the existence of collective disputes between employees and management in the preceding year, and demographic data such as the size of the company. This allowed us to test whether (1) any effect of status was independent of the actual existence of conflict in the company or factors such as company size, consistent with a strategic explanation of the effect of status; and (2) whether the effect of status might depend on (i.e., be moderated by) the actual existence of conflict. This latter possibility might indicate a boundary condition for the strategic effect of status, such that status differences in the characterization of conflict are reduced when, objectively speaking, conflict clearly exists.

## Method

### Participants and sample characteristics

Responses came from 2,680 companies in the UK. The average (mean) number of employees in the largest non-managerial occupational group in the company was 261.75 ( $SD = 625.49$ ), with considerable variation across companies in terms of size (range: 0 to 7418 employees).

Of the total sample of 24,661 individuals, 2,680 were managers and 21,981 were employees. Of the managers, 1,456 (54.3%) were female and 1,224 (45.7%) were male. Of the employees, 12,263 (56.2%) were female and 9,572 (43.8%) were male (146 did not provide a response). For analytic purposes, participant sex was scored as 1 = Male and 2 = Female. Age was recorded using age range bands, but only for the employees. The modal age band was 40-49 years (6,170 employees), followed by 50-59 years (5,329), 30-39 years (4,611) and 22-29 years (3,142). The remainder were above 60 years old (1,713), 21 years and under (859), or were recorded as missing (157).

Sample size was determined by the number of respondents to the WERS, with all respondents included in the analyses. According to G\*power 3.1, the sample provides more than 99.9% power to detect any effect of  $\eta_p^2 \geq .002$  in the present design ( $df_{\text{num}} = 1$ ; groups = 4).

### Materials and Procedure

Fieldwork for the survey took place from March 2011 to June 2012. According to WERS publications (Wanrooy et al., 2013), “A total of 2,680 face-to-face interviews with managers were carried out. The average length of the management interview was 90 minutes... In workplaces with 25 or fewer employees, all were given the questionnaire. In larger workplaces, 25 employees were randomly selected to participate” (p.4). The questionnaires thus incorporated a wide range of measures covering a variety of topics relating to workplace experiences, and only the subset of relevant questions are the focus of analysis here. Full details of the questionnaires can be found at the WERS website (The 2011 Workplace Employment Relations Study (WERS), 2015).

**Manager-employee relations.** The key outcome variable for our present hypotheses was *how would you rate the relationship/how would you describe relations between management and employees generally at this workplace?* Responses were recorded on a 5-point scale with the following discrete labels: 1= very good; 2 = good; 3 = neither good nor poor; 4 = poor; 5 = very poor. A high score thus indicates poorer relations between management and employees.

**Collective disputes.** The survey of managers also included a question about the actual occurrence of collective conflict in the company: *Has there been a collective dispute over pay or conditions in the last year?* Responses were recorded in a ‘yes’ (scored as 1) or ‘no’ (scored as 2) format. Of the 2,680 companies, 397 had experienced a collective dispute during the preceding year, while 2,274 had not (9 responses were missing).

## Results

### Analytic strategy

The nested nature of the data – specifically, participants nested within companies – meant that we adopted a mixed-models approach to the analysis, in which company was included as a group-level random effect. An intra-class correlation of .19 indicated that some of the variance in the characterization of manager-employee relations was attributable to company-level variation. We proceeded with the mixed-models approach in which tests of the effects of the predictors described below took into account variance arising from company-level influences<sup>8</sup>. Analysis was conducted using SPSS v21, and employed restricted maximum likelihood estimation.

The focus of the analysis was to test the effect of status (employee vs. manager) on the characterization of relations between employees and managers. Specifically, we examined whether this was independent of the actual existence of conflict in the company, consistent with a strategic explanation of the effect of status, or whether the effect of status

might depend on (i.e., be moderated by) the actual existence of conflict. The model thus included the main effects of status and collective disputes, along with their interaction term.

Also included in the model were the main effect of gender, and the interaction term between status and gender. Given the prevalence of both lay and academic assumptions regarding the relative conflict-proneness of men and women (e.g., Holt & DeVore, 2005), we sought to test the effect of status while adjusting for gender, and also to test whether the effect of status might depend on (i.e., be moderated by) gender. Again, this latter possibility represents a test of a potential boundary condition to the strategic effect of status.

Finally, the model also included company size as a covariate, in order to adjust for any influence that size might have on the perceived quality of relations between employees and managers.

## Findings

Using the method described by Snijders and Bosker (2012), the predictors together explained an estimated 6% of the variance in the characterization of employee-manager relations.

The main effects of status,  $F(1, 23690) = 535.75, p < .001$ , collective disputes,  $F(1, 4465) = 36.96, p < .001$ , and company size,  $F(1, 2241) = 33.01, p < .001$ , were all significant, but the main effect of gender was not,  $F(1, 23644) = 2.35, p = .126$ . As predicted, managers characterized relations as more positive ( $M = 1.74, SD = 0.68$ ) than did employees ( $M = 2.38, SD = 1.03$ ). In addition, relations were characterized as more positive if there had been no collective disputes in the previous year ( $M = 2.27, SD = 1.01$ ) than if there had been ( $M = 2.50, SD = 1.01$ ). Smaller company size also predicted a more positive characterization of employee-manager relations.

Notably, the interaction between status and collective disputes was not significant,  $F(1, 23691) < 1$ , indicating that the tendency for managers to characterize relations more positively than employees was not affected by whether or not there had recently been an actual collective conflict in the company. In contrast, the interaction between status and gender was significant,  $F(1, 23807) = 16.13, p < .001$ . Analysis of simple main effects revealed that although it was highly significant in both cases, the effect of status was slightly stronger for men,  $F(1, 23758) = 417.55, p < .001, Ms (SDs) = 2.49(1.07)$  vs.  $1.72(0.66)$ , than it was for women,  $F(1, 23777) = 279.72, p < .001, Ms (SDs) = 2.30(0.98)$  vs.  $1.76(0.72)$ .

## Discussion

The finding that managers characterize employee-manager relations more positively than employees is consistent with the overarching hypothesis that intergroup status

differences can lead group members to strategically characterize relations with an outgroup as more or less conflictual (H1a). Notably, this effect was independent of, and was not moderated by, the effect of the existence of *actual* collective conflict in the preceding year. This suggests that in the present case at least, the actual presence of collective conflict does not in itself present a boundary condition to the effect of status on characterizations of relations between ingroup and outgroup. That said, variation in the perceived intensity or bitterness of particular disputes was not taken into account here, and it remains possible that particularly entrenched, bitter or high-stakes disputes could lead to a reduction in the effect of status on the characterization of conflict, as the existence of conflict becomes undeniable. On the other hand, while gender did moderate the effect of status, the effect size was small and the effect of status remained highly significant amongst both men and women. This suggests that the status-based impetus to characterize conflict strategically – at least in the current occupational setting – is present amongst both men and women, even if men express it slightly more strongly (see Evers, Fischer, Rodriguez-Mosquera, & Manstead, 2005, for a similar point regarding gender differences in the expression of anger).

Turning to limitations of the study, the analysis of large-scale, nested data raises twin considerations: the need to refer to effect sizes to assess the meaningfulness of significant effects in such a large data set, and the difficulty of computing effect sizes *per se* in multi-level analyses. The conventional ANOVA analysis (see Footnote 8) indicates (1) that the findings match very closely those of the multi-level analysis (reflecting the small intra-class correlation of company), and (2) that effect sizes – as indicated by  $\eta_p^2$  – were indeed small. Nevertheless, the strongest effect ( $\eta_p^2 = .02$ ) was the main effect of status, suggesting that it accounts for a non-trivial portion of the variance in the characterization of relations between the status groups.

Another limitation is that the occurrence of collective conflict was itself self-reported by managers, and could conceivably be subject to the same strategic biases that shape the main outcome measure. The data do not thus contain truly objective indicators of collective conflict, or of other potential moderators of the relationship between status and conflict characterization, such as the size of wage differentials between employees and managers, or wage transparency. Tests of the moderating role of such factors were not possible as a consequence.

Finally, the *strategic* dimension of characterizing conflict in a particular manner is only inferred rather than directly tested. The audience to whom participants believed that they

were characterizing workplace relations or would be revealing their salary was not specified or manipulated, leaving participants to infer the relevant audience – if indeed a specific audience was salient at all. The data did not directly address any underlying motives that might have informed their responses either. The strengths of this study are instead in allowing a large-scale and ecologically-valid test of our basic hypothesis, complementing the findings of Studies 1 and 2 which addressed process and motive more directly.

### **General Discussion**

The present research tested the idea that far from being fixed or obvious, the existence of conflict between groups is contested by members of different groups. Specifically, it was hypothesized that characterizations of conflict reflect the strategic interests of groups of differing status, with high (vs. low) ingroup status often being best served by playing down conflict with an outgroup.

In line with H1a and b, Study 1 provided evidence that the effect of status on characterizations of conflict depended on audience, and was connected to status-management concerns. Specifically, participants in a high ingroup status condition characterized ingroup–outgroup relations as less conflictual than did those in a low ingroup status condition – but only when addressing an outgroup (vs. ingroup) audience. Study 2 replicated the interaction between status and audience, and provided evidence that it in turn depends on contextual factors that are known to affect the status management motives of group members (H2)—specifically, the stability of the intergroup status difference and the perceived legitimacy of an outgroup’s ‘challenge’. Moreover, consistent with H3, high-status (vs. low-status) group members also attempted to communicate with the outgroup in a manner that defused any potential conflict, but only when status relations were unstable and therefore required a strategic response. Finally, Study 3 provided ‘in the field’ evidence that a high-status group (managers) characterized between-group relations in more positive terms than did the low-status group (employees) in the relationship.

The studies as a whole provide converging support for the over-arching hypothesis that status affects the extent to which relations with an outgroup are characterized as conflictual, and that this effect reflects strategic status-related concerns. Particular strengths of the studies were that they employed a combination of pre-existing and ad hoc/minimal groups, and used different methods to manipulate ingroup status, including varying the status relationship with one particular outgroup (Study 1), and sampling from groups on either side of an intergroup status divide (Studies 2 and 3).

In terms of wider theoretical significance, the present findings are particularly striking in view of previous research which has demonstrated that it is high group status that tends to produce *more* ingroup bias and discrimination (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2001; Mullen et al., 1992). This works against the notion that the present findings regarding the characterization of conflict simply reflect ingroup bias, prejudice, or favoritism. Specifically, they indicate that group members played down and attempted to defuse intergroup tension in precisely the conditions under which *greater* levels of ingroup-favoring responses would be expected. Far from being contradictory, this leads us to suggest that playing down or attempting to defuse conflict should also be viewed as an ingroup-favoring response for high-status groups.

In this sense, the present research complements and extends a variety of existing findings which broadly show that members of high-status groups can strategically engage in relatively positive intergroup behavior when it serves to maintain their high status. Examples include benevolent (as opposed to hostile) sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Jackman, 1994); ‘helping’ behavior that actually increases the dependency of a low-status group on the high-status ingroup (Nadler & Halabi, 2006), reduced ingroup favoritism by advantaged groups under specific conditions (Sachdev & Bourhis, 1985; Vanbeselaere et al., 2006); and a preference for focusing on intergroup commonalities rather than differences in interactions with disadvantaged groups (Saguy et al., 2008). The specific advance offered by our research is that it places a focus on the representation of the *relationship itself* as conflictual or not. This is a representation that by and large is taken for granted in analyses of intergroup conflict (Livingstone et al., 2015). Indeed, it is not the focus of any of the research mentioned above, but clearly has considerable potential to shape the effectiveness of interventions to manage and improve relations between groups.

It should also be clear that we do not view the effect of status on characterizations of conflict as a fixed or generic effect. Instead, it is likely to be highly sensitive to social-structural considerations on the one hand, and the communicative context on the other hand, because these different sets of considerations influence the strategic needs of the ingroup (in terms of the security of ingroup status), and its sense of how these needs can best be met by characterizing the relationship with the outgroup in particular ways.

### **Limitations and future research**

Notwithstanding these strengths, the present research could be extended in a number of ways. First, further examination of other contextual moderators of the effect of status on the strategic characterization of conflict is warranted, including the power (as distinct from status; see Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) of the respective groups, and the specific forms of threat



posed by the outgroup. While low-status group members tended to play up conflict relative to the high-status group in key conditions, this may be less evident in contexts in which a high-status, high-power outgroup has the willingness and ability to seriously harm or annihilate the ingroup.

Second, the dynamics of conflict characterization in pre-existing intergroup settings is ripe for research. For example, the approaches adopted in the present studies could be supplemented with other forms of analysis, such as rhetorical analysis of the discourse of group members in ‘real’ conflicts. Third, the communicative dimension of the characterization of conflict suggests the possibility of examining the *effect* of such communication on the recipient group (Wright, 1997). How do low-status groups actually *respond* to a high-status group’s initial attempts to play down conflict, for instance, and is this reaction contingent upon social structural relations between the groups? It may be that communication from a high-status group to the effect that there is no conflict might be taken at face value by members of a low-status group as a friendly gesture, or it might be seen as patronizing, disingenuous, and even insulting. Key factors here will include *in situ* perceptions of the legitimacy of the status relationship (as opposed to the legitimacy of a specific act, as examined in Study 2 here), as well as perceptions of historical relations between the groups, especially in terms of whether they suggest a long-standing antagonism (Bar-Tal, 2007; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Livingstone & Haslam, 2008; Nets-Zehngut, 2012)

Fourth, it is possible that the salience of a third-party group will accentuate the strategic characterization of conflict, as group members seek to enlist the support of wider audiences for their ingroup’s position (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Subašić., Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). On the one hand, characterizing relations with a more powerful outgroup as conflictual might serve to encourage the intervention of third parties in a manner that protects or otherwise benefits the ingroup in its status relationship with the outgroup. Salient examples include appeals by Palestinian representatives for intervention by the United Nations in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict (e.g., Times of Israel, 2014) – appeals which historically have been resisted by Israel (Zunes, 2002). On the other hand, framing relations with a lower-status outgroup as benign – particularly when outgroup members are seeking to alter the status quo – can serve to reduce the potential for such third-party intervention, or even to turn it against the outgroup by characterizing outgroup action as the work of agitators that seek to disrupt an otherwise positive, settled intergroup relationship (Subašić., Reynolds, & Turner, 2008). Such rhetoric is commonly deployed in the context of riots to explain away

collective conflict between police and communities (Reicher & Stott, 2011; Stott & Reicher, 1998), and in the context of industrial disputes as a way of denying tension between management and workers (Darlington, 2006).

Finally, our findings may also be relevant to reconciliation processes following armed conflict and genocide. The labelling of events as 'war' or 'genocide' can itself be highly contentious (e.g., Bilali, 2013) and consequential (e.g., Leidner, 2015), and our research suggests that there are strategic dimensions to whether perpetrator, victim, and third-party groups characterize atrocities and genocide in those terms. Understanding those strategic factors may in turn help us to determine when and how different parties can coalesce around a shared definition of events, as a critical precursor to peace and reconciliation.

### **Conclusion**

The present findings suggest that far from being a 'given', the existence of 'conflict' between groups is contested, and that the characterization of conflict reflects strategic needs rooted in intergroup status differences. The characterization of conflict by group members is thus itself part of the dynamics of struggle between groups more generally. More broadly, the present findings add to the growing body of work on the diverse and often ostensibly positive processes through which status differences can be maintained, showing that for high-status groups at least, playing down conflict is an underacknowledged part of maintaining intergroup status hierarchies.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The extent to which participants characterized the intergroup relationship in negative or positive terms was also measured on a seven-item semantic differential scale ( $\alpha = .89$ ). This supplemented the conflict characterization scale by gauging how positively or negatively relations with the outgroup were characterized as being, but without specific mention of conflict. Analysis of responses on this scale are reported in supplementary materials, and revealed a similar, but slightly weaker and non-significant pattern to the conflict characterization scale. Also reported in supplementary materials is a MANOVA analysis including both the conflict characterization scale and the characterization of intergroup relationship scale.

<sup>2</sup> The questionnaire also included 'thermometer' measures of feelings about the ingroup and the outgroup. These were not directly relevant to the present hypotheses, but are included in the data file for the study.

<sup>3</sup> All analyses were also conducted as linear mixed models in which participants' group number was included as a group-level random effect. These yielded almost identical results, and are reported in supplementary materials.

<sup>4</sup> Data from a further 28 participants – randomly distributed across conditions – were not considered after those participants expressed suspicion about the purpose of the study during an extensive debrief.

<sup>5</sup> As in Study 1, the questionnaire also included 'thermometer' measures of feelings about the ingroup and the outgroup. A scale of identification with the assigned ingroup was also included. These were not directly relevant to the present hypotheses, but are included in the data file for the study.

<sup>6</sup> The extent to which participants characterized the intergroup relationship in negative or positive terms was also measured on the same scale used in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .95$ ). Analysis of responses on this scale are reported in supplementary materials, and revealed a very similar pattern to the conflict characterization scale. Also reported in supplementary materials is a MANOVA analysis including both the conflict characterization scale and the characterization of intergroup relationship scale.

<sup>7</sup> All analyses were also conducted as linear mixed models in which participants' pair/group number was included as a group-level random effect. These yielded almost identical results, and are reported in supplementary materials.

<sup>8</sup> An equivalent model using a more conventional general linear modeling (ANOVA) approach which ignored the company-level nesting of the data revealed a virtually identical pattern. The effect sizes ( $\eta_p^2$ ) of the effects were as follows: status = .020; gender = .001; collective disputes = .002; company size = .004; status X collective disputes < .001; status X gender = .001.

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### Figure captions

*Figure 1.* Interaction between status and audience on conflict characterization (Study 1). Error bars represent standard errors.

*Figure 2.* Moderated mediation analysis of the effect of status via status satisfaction on conflict characterization, moderated by audience (Study 1). Path weights are unstandardized (*b*) coefficients.

*Figure 3.* Interaction between status, stability, illegitimacy and audience on conflict characterization in Study 2. Positive scores represent a more conflictual characterization (conflict played up) and negative scores a less conflictual characterization (conflict played down). The two-way interaction between status and audience was only significant when status was unstable and perceived illegitimacy was high (panel D). Error bars represent standard errors.

*Figure 4.* Interaction between status and stability on content of communication between the ingroup and outgroup in Study 2. Positive scores indicate that the communication attempted to escalate conflict, while negative scores indicate that it attempted to defuse conflict. Error bars represent standard errors.

Figure 1.

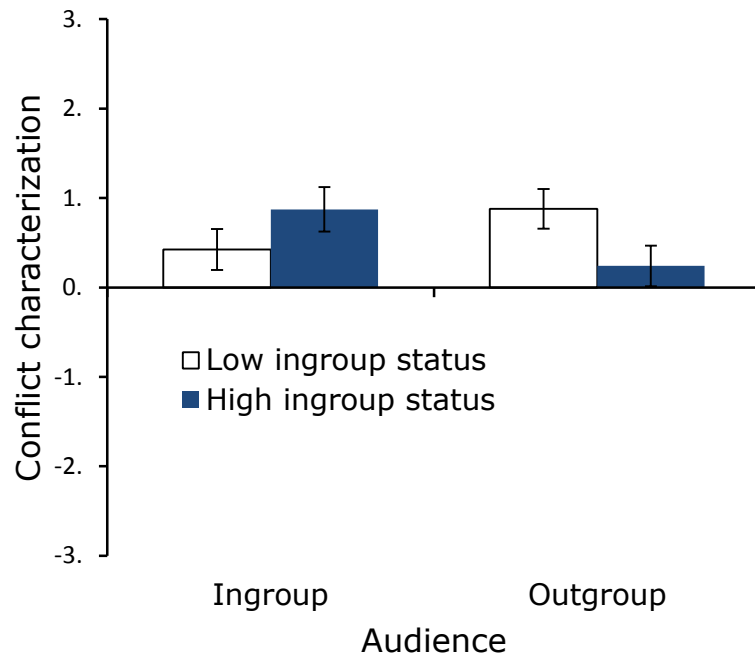
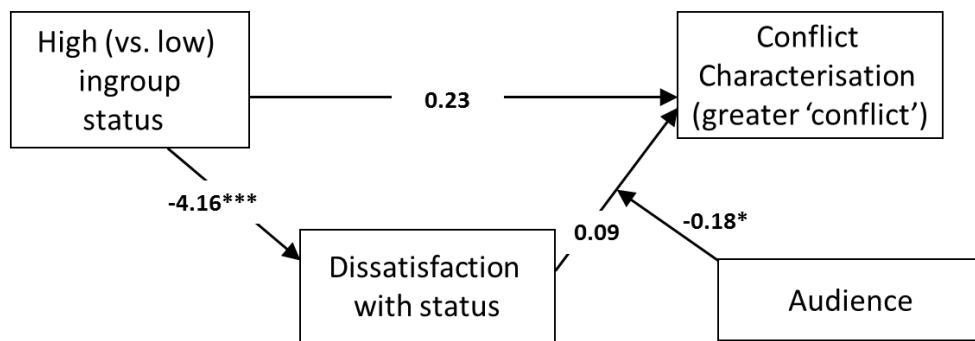


Figure 2.

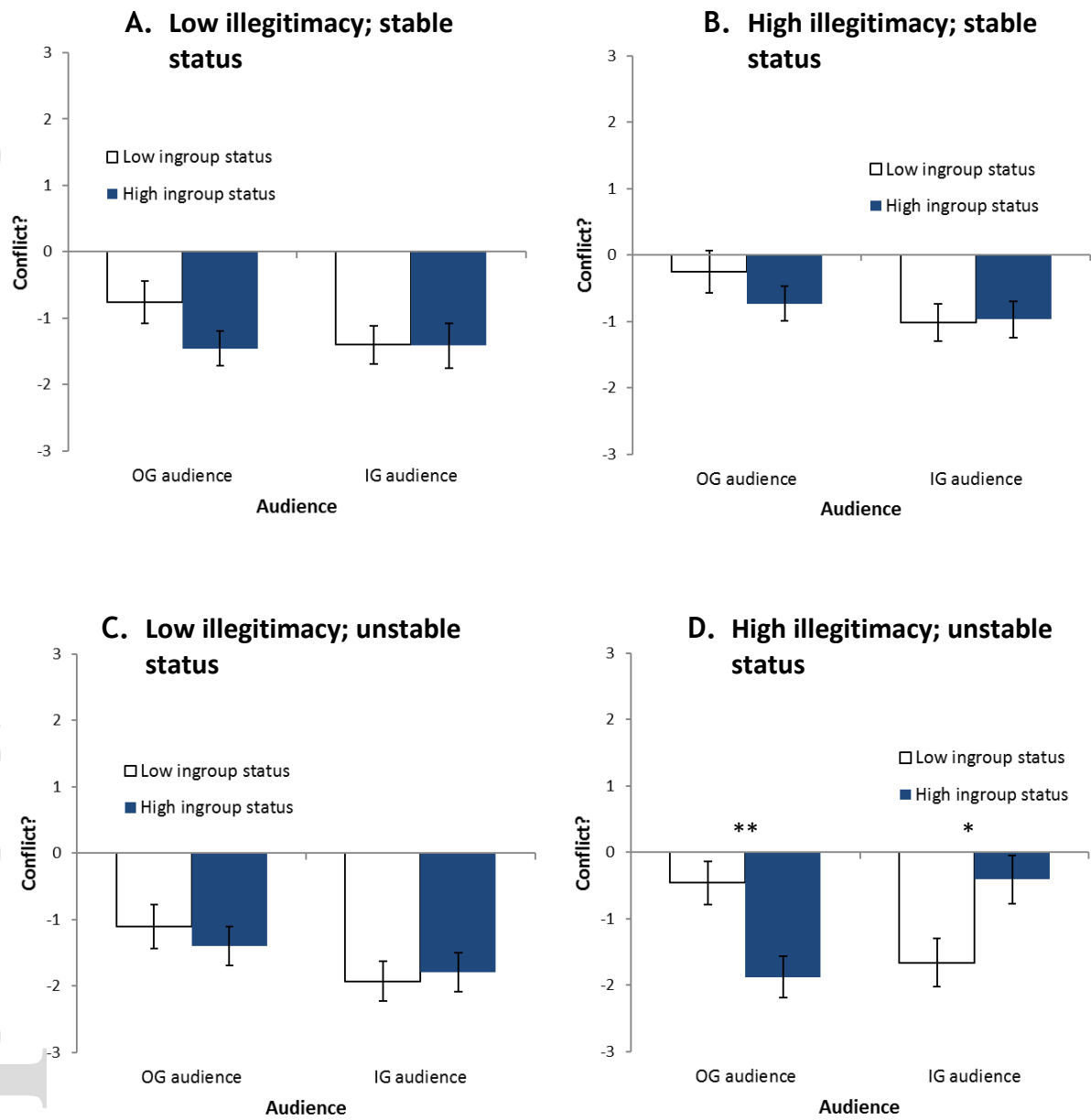


Indirect effects:

Ingroup audience condition:  $b = 0.02$ ,  $se = 0.43$ ; 95% bias corrected CIs = -0.80 / 0.87

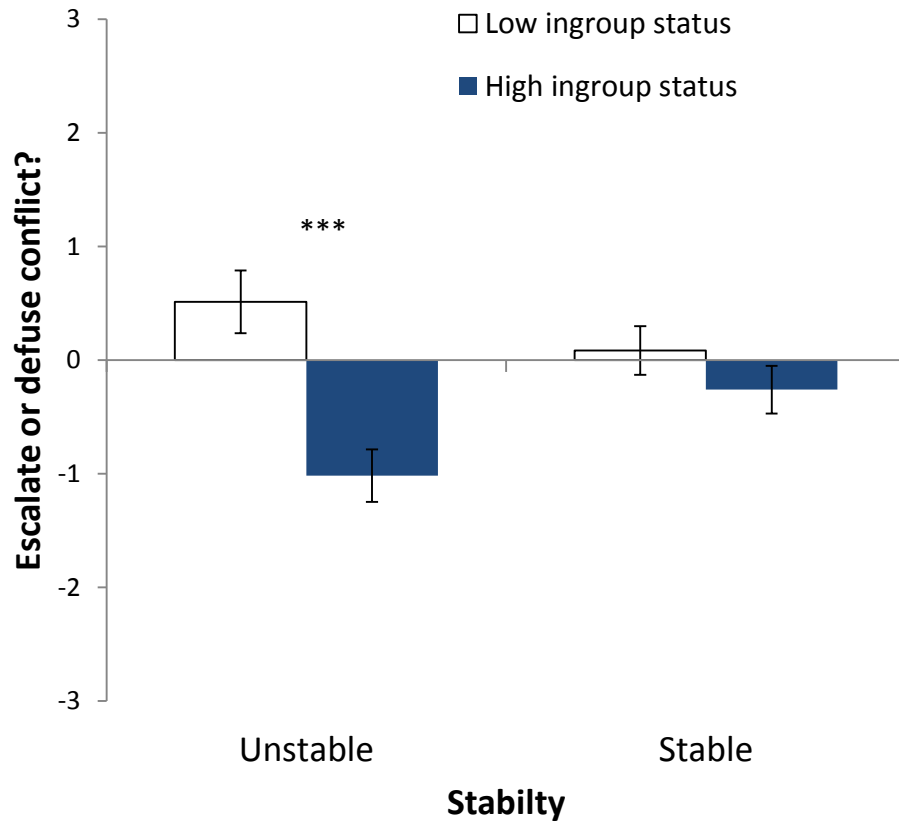
Outgroup audience condition:  $b = -0.71$ ,  $se = 0.42$ ; 95% bias corrected CIs = -1.66 / -0.01

Figure 3.



\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

Figure 4.



\*\*\* $p < .001$